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ABSTRACT

Urban school restructuring, although it can break down bureaucracy and empower teachers, can also seem distant from the day-to-day problems of most teachers, and even increase teacher burnout. Many of the following initiatives of the school restructuring movement may intensify a teacher's frustration: (1) school-based management may raise the community's expectation but increase pressure on teachers and increase teacher frustration if new control does not lead to clear educational benefits; (2) accountability may increase teacher stress and promote covert competition; (3) career ladders may increase competition or result in bitterness as the criteria for promotion are ambiguous or tainted; (4) the intense atmosphere and professional demands of schools-within-schools can exacerbate tensions, favoritism, and competition for scarce resources as the minischools within the schools compete for recognition and resources and add a layer of bureaucracy and stress; (5) curriculum initiatives, when their implementation lacks appropriate staff development, mentoring, and peer coaching, can generate stress; and (6) flexible scheduling and team teaching do not work well in a school with a competitive ethos. Although all initiatives may improve urban education, only curriculum initiatives improve teaching and learning. Included are eight references. (JB)

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URBAN SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING AND TEACHER BURNOUT

Urban schools have long been troubled and have endured many waves of reform. Consequently, staff exhaustion and cynicism often affect how, and even whether, these reforms are implemented. While school restructuring, the latest reform measure, can break down bureaucracy and empower teachers, it also can seem distant from the day-to-day problems of most teachers, and even increase burnout among some (Corcoran, Walker, & White, 1988).

Burnout—the reaction to prolonged high stress—commonly results either in withdrawing and caring less, or in working harder, often mechanically, to the point of exhaustion (Farber, 1991). This digest considers the impact of several components of school restructuring on burnout.

School-Based Management

School-based management (SBM) offers greater participation in decision-making to teachers, parents, and others at the school level. In the best case, SBM empowers teachers to develop the process and goals of education, and enhances their sense of professionalism. For some, the chance to exercise administrative and negotiating skills may be a welcome challenge (Lichtenstein, McLaughlin, & Knudsen, 1991).

But SBM may also involve teachers either in long meetings about insignificant decisions or in making important decisions for which they lack resources, support, and expertise. In troubled schools, SBM teams can get bogged down in daily crises, resulting in frustration as long-term goals recede from sight (Richardson & Sistrunk, 1989). At the same time, by raising the school board's and the general public's expectations, SBM may increase pressure on teachers.

Furthermore, reputedly empowered teachers may not relish their authority, feel more effective in their classrooms, or experience themselves as professionally enhanced. In fact, teachers' sense of empowerment may arise less from controlling what goes on in a school than from their knowledge about their fields, their associations in the professional community, and their understanding of educational policy (Lichtenstein, McLaughlin, & Knudsen, 1991).

Finally, SBM may increase frustration if teachers' new control doesn't lead to clear educational benefits, and if the new bureaucracy is as intransigent as the school principal, acting autonomously, had been (Gomez, 1989).

Accountability

When accountability systems help teachers identify and serve their students' needs, these systems can reduce burnout. However, burned-out teachers may not participate in the extensive thinking necessary to develop an effective system, and then may experience the system as an externally imposed and inflexible interference in their classroom.

By inviting scrutiny from new sources, even good accountability systems increase teacher stress and can promote covert competition, as teachers strive to make their classroom "the best" (Trusman, 1989). Finally, insofar as accountability systems are based on externally imposed criteria, they are antithetical to teacher empowerment, which has long been considered one of the strongest antidotes to burnout (Friedman, 1991).

Career Ladders

Career ladders show respect for experienced teachers demonstrating particular excellence by offering promotional opportunities. They enable teachers to earn more money, take on new roles (mentoring novice teachers, for instance), and gain more prestige and professional fulfillment.

However, as with any system that rewards only some individuals, competition increases. Bitterness and cynicism may also result if the criteria for promotion are ambiguous or are tainted by political considerations. Promoted teachers may experience added stress and burnout if extra pay and prestige are not accompanied by sufficient resources or administrative support.

Schools-Within-Schools

Breaking down large schools into small communities is an easy way to improve the quality of life for both teachers and students. Schools-within-schools enable better communication among teachers, parents, and students; enhance the staff's sense of control; and promote a generally warmer, more intimate atmosphere (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988).

Of course, a small community can also promote increased scrutiny and greater group tension, exacerbating jealousy, favoritism, and competition for scarce resources. Sometimes the minischools within a larger school also compete for recognition and resources, and add a layer of bureaucracy and stress to an already oppressive structure.

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Because minischools are small, intense communities, only one or two burned-out teachers can sabotage the high energy needed by the group. However, since it takes a fair amount of energy and enthusiasm to work in one, burned-out teachers are apt to decline an assignment there.

Curriculum Initiatives

Curriculum initiatives such as multidisciplinary units, new approaches to math or reading, and multicultural education can give teachers a renewed sense of excitement, and draw faculty together in collaborative ventures. Insofar as these initiatives are tailored to students' needs, they may improve performance, and, thus, teachers' sense of efficacy.

Ideally, curriculum changes should be accompanied by extensive staff development, mentoring, and peer coaching, but these are often in short supply. Thus, teachers may suffer from the additional stresses of having more work but no additional support.

Flexible Scheduling and Team Teaching

Flexible scheduling and team teaching promote sustained contacts both among teachers and with students, lessening the possibility of teacher burnout by improving collegial contact and support. Yet, collaborative activities will not foster collegiality if the school sets up a competitive ethos. Nor do these reforms address the major obstacle to collegiality: heavy workloads due to large classes and undue clerical work (Corcoran, et al., 1988).

School Restructuring and Burnout

The components of school restructuring reviewed above have the potential of improving the context of urban teaching. Each can make possible a greater sense of efficacy and control among teachers, and stronger teacher-student connection. However, none affects such district policies as pupil assignment, professional development, or evaluation, all of which are critical to teachers' well-being. None ensures that teachers will be involved in decision-making or work with their peers—or that they will feel empowered by their added responsibilities. Of all the components, only curriculum initiatives improve teaching and learning, the best way to decrease burnout (Farber, 1991).

—Barry Farber and Carol Ascher

Consultation on this digest was provided by Judy Aronson, of the United Federation of Teachers, Special Educator Support Program.

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